

Choice and Voice in School Calendar Reform¹

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Two Ontario elementary schools' site-based design and implementation of a modified year-round calendar shows the importance of choice and voice in change processes. Interviews and surveys with a superintendent, the two principals, teachers, and parents show how a small structural change may have a large impact on various aspects of school life, including attendance, motivation, and enthusiasm. However, the data demonstrate that there is a point beyond which flexibility and choice may prove inequitable, and in fact may disadvantage some of the people they were intended to serve.

La conception sur place et la mise en œuvre d'un calendrier scolaire modifié dans deux écoles primaires ontariennes montrent l'importance du choix et de la participation dans les processus de changement. Les entrevues et les sondages auprès d'un surintendant, des deux directeurs d'école, des enseignants et des parents indiquent comment un petit changement structurel peut avoir un impact de taille sur les divers aspects de la vie à l'école, notamment sur l'assiduité, la motivation et l'enthousiasme. Les données démontrent toutefois qu'il y a un point au-delà duquel la souplesse et le choix peuvent s'avérer injustifiés et même désavantager certaines des personnes qu'ils devaient accommoder.

Rapid demographic and economic changes in society have been accompanied by calls for educational reforms to enhance fiscal and academic accountability and educational choice. One increasingly frequent proposal in North America is year-round schooling (YRS), sometimes legislated to provide relief from fiscal pressures and sometimes voluntarily implemented to provide richer educational opportunities. In 2000, YRS was in place in 4 provinces and 41 states and involved over 2 million students in 547 districts (National Association for Year-Round Education, 2000). Over the course of its history in North America, YRS has evoked either passionate support or fervid and angry opposition.

Poseidon School District,² located in one of the most rapidly growing areas of Canada, contains a mix of urban, suburban, and rural schools. For almost 10 years, a few parents, trustees, and educators had discussed the possibility of implementing a form of YRS. Despite several visits to year-round (YR) schools and attendance at a few conferences, interest was minimal. However, after five years of preliminary investigation, a few

eager trustees and parents initiated an exploratory process that included striking a board committee and seconding a teacher to be the district project leader. Schools were given the option of developing and implementing alternative school-year calendars designed by their own school communities to meet their unique needs. Ultimately two schools implemented modified calendars on a pilot basis.

Countryside Elementary School, a rural school, chose a single-track YRS model for all its students. The larger and more urban Seagull Elementary School chose to add a single-track YR option for those who wanted it while also maintaining a traditional calendar for the rest of its students. Neither school chose to implement a typical YR calendar with regular rotations of 9 to 12 weeks in school followed by 3 or 4 weeks of vacation. The calendars chosen are better described as *modified* or *alternative*. In each case, the calendar change represented a modest relocation of 2 or 3 weeks of vacation, inserted as 1-week breaks during established terms.

We explore the relationship between school calendar changes and aspects of choice and voice. We describe the early experiences of these two schools in terms of the forms of YRS they selected and the initial impact of the calendar changes; discuss issues related to parental and teacher choice, support for, and satisfaction with the reform; and offer a preliminary assessment of the effect of choice on the success of the initiative. Although we collected data from administrators, teachers, parents, students, and central office personnel, this analysis focuses on the responses of parents and school-based educators.

PLANNING FOR CHANGE

The district established several criteria to guide planning for modified calendars. To ensure that neither teachers nor parents were coerced, schools had to apply to have a modified calendar approved. To be considered, they had to demonstrate a “high level” of support from teachers, parents, and students. As well, a new calendar could not add substantially to a school’s operating costs, so only schools with air conditioning were considered. Finally, bussing costs could not increase substantially.

Early in the planning process, the district had gained the tentative support of the Teachers’ Federation by agreeing that no teacher would be forced to teach in a modified-calendar school or on a modified schedule. Additionally, the district agreed that after teaching for a year on a modified calendar, any teacher who wanted to change back to a traditional schedule could do so.

Initially about 12 schools applied to be considered for a modified calendar. After consulting with the board and their respective school

communities, 2 schools achieved the required 80% parental support and received approval to initiate two-year pilot programs in the fall of 1997. The 2 schools proceeded quite differently.

Countryside is a new building at the edge of a small rural community with an ethnically homogeneous population. Before the new building opened, its 420 students had been educated in an overcrowded school in a neighbouring town. When the opportunity arose, the school council opted for a single-track YRS model to keep the school community together.

Seagull, on the other hand, is a 20-year-old facility with an ethnically mixed population of approximately 680 students, located in the district's largest city. The principal described it as a place where, at one time, teachers had been so demoralized that no one wanted to teach there. When he was appointed to the school, his colleagues jokingly asked him what he had done wrong, because a transfer to Seagull was considered punishment. After much deliberation, the school designed a calendar intended to maximize choice. Two calendars were put into effect at Seagull Elementary. Teachers and students were asked to choose whether they wanted to remain on the traditional calendar or move to the new, modified YR schedule.

In each school, the impetus for a calendar change had come from parents. The district project leader disseminated information and answered questions at public information meetings. The presence of the project leader permitted principals to remain relatively neutral and facilitate a collaborative, exploratory process. (We have found elsewhere that when principals must respond to questions and correct misinformation about YRS, they are perceived to be advocates, pushing for a particular outcome [Shields & LaRocque, 1997; Shields & Oberg, 2000].) Each school council spent time educating teachers and parents, requesting input about the most desirable calendar for the school. Each used surveys both to inform the stakeholders and to collect data to help them reach a final decision.

Countryside followed a route often described in the YRS literature in that frequent information meetings were held over 18 months. An 80% vote approved a modified calendar that started two weeks early in August and added one-week vacations in October and May. Consistent with the district's policy to permit choice and not force change on anyone, eight students who did not want the modified calendar were allowed to transfer to a neighbouring elementary school within walking distance of their houses.

At Seagull, the process was somewhat different. There, the school council stipulated that it would require a 100% return rate (a rate they say was achieved through the intensive efforts of a group of supportive parents). Because the principal recognized YRS as something of a political football (consistent with the findings of Weiss, 1993), he had not originally opted

to have his school consider participating. After a number of unexpected events, including an erroneous newspaper report that the school had chosen an alternative calendar, the district project leader held a public meeting. About 100 people attended the meeting, including both a strong contingent in favour of the experiment and a group of vocal antagonists. In the middle of the polarized meeting, someone asked the principal what he thought. His response was, "If it's better for kids, we should do it as long as the school community has the ability to design its own calendar." Given those conditions, at the end of the meeting, everyone voted for further investigation.

The principal then asked a retired colleague to help him communicate with and get feedback from the students. The colleague visited intermediate classes with a blank calendar and asked students to indicate their ideal vacation and in-school times. The project leader conducted a similar exercise at a meeting with parents. The responses from parents, teachers, and students clearly showed that there would not be consensus on a single calendar for the whole school; thus, the council opted for a dual-track approach. Part of the school would continue to follow the traditional calendar; other classes would follow a calendar that started three weeks earlier in the fall and had three weeks of vacation distributed throughout the school year. No one would be forced to change to the modified schedule.

Preliminary enrolment figures indicated that 40% of the students would enroll on the modified calendar. On registration day, however, 58% of the students signed up. The next year, the number choosing the modified calendar increased.

The implementation of year-round calendars is often accompanied by consideration of whether to offer intersession programs, which frequently take the form of remedial or enrichment activities, during vacation periods. Countryside parents decisively rejected the notion, insisting that the two one-week breaks were vacations. At Seagull, an extensive program of intersession activities was planned for the three one-week breaks on the modified calendar. In an attempt to ensure equity, students on both calendars were permitted to participate in these field trips and special activities. Later some teachers and parents noted that this well-intentioned strategy created difficulties and inequity.

In summary, with district support, both school communities modified their calendars to meet their individual needs. Although they chose different versions of YRS, each permitted significant choice by both teachers and parents.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Murphy (1992) identified four components central to most educational change initiatives: organization and governance, with specific emphasis on school-based management; voice and choice; teacher empowerment and professionalism; and the development of meaningful pedagogy (p. 98). He associated choice and voice with a “realignment of power and influence between professional educators and lay members of [a] community,” stating that the “traditional dominant relationship — with professional educators on the playing field and parents on the sidelines acting as cheerleaders or agitators or more likely passively watching the action — is replaced by a more equal distribution of influence” (p. 103).

Although much of the literature on choice focuses on empowerment of either teachers or parents, or implies privatization of education, we use choice and voice to mean processes that offer participants (both teachers and parents) significant roles in decision making. Some researchers have used these terms to suggest collaboration and/or consultation with various groups — predominantly parents, business partners, or community partners (Foster, 1986; Greene, 1988; Hargreaves, 1995). They advocate that educational leaders initiate dialogue with those involved in, or affected by, forthcoming changes in education.

Barth (1990) emphasizes that teachers need to be involved in decision making from the beginning of the process. Barnett and Whitaker (1996) agree, noting that “to a large extent, teachers have not historically had control over the basic decisions affecting their work” (p. 41). Sergiovanni (1996) stresses that empowering teachers enables them to have more control over their classrooms and “to make changes in their practices” that are necessary for them to be more effective (p. 141). Some (e.g., Fullan, 1991) who advocate enhancing teacher involvement have nonetheless criticized as naïve suggestions that merely involving teachers on committees increases their overall support for an innovation. McDonnell and Elmore (1987) add that teacher empowerment is related to systemic change that includes modifying underlying structures in ways that permit new understandings of effectiveness and good practice and that require a new distribution of authority.

Several researchers emphasize the need to increase parents’ involvement in decision making. Fullan (1999) claims that “in too many cases, parents and the community are actually outsiders” (p. 61). Coleman (1998) asserts that “collaboration with parents in building active communities of

learners” is the “most important task facing the school in the immediate future” (p. 43). Others have consistently found that many legislated mechanisms for broadening parent involvement are ineffective (Lucas, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1978–79). Later, Fullan (1991) identified some specific characteristics that might enhance the effectiveness of such legislation: clear delineation of mandates; careful monitoring; and commitment, support, and follow-through by legislative assemblies. He found that success also improves when decision-makers actively pursue, and remain accountable for, parental involvement. Other authors urge an increase of parental involvement in decision making, claiming benefits in terms of increased school support and student success (Epstein, 1992; Joyce, 1978). They also claim that parents are empowered when they are given support and training in how to gather accurate information and when they have real power to accomplish specific tasks.

Recent research about school reform emphasizes that parents, teachers, and educational leaders must work collaboratively if reform is to be successful (Fullan, 1999; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Pounder, 1998). Our case study examines how teachers’ and parents’ roles in the implementation of new school calendars seem to illustrate Murphy’s four categories and to exemplify the collaborative decision-making approach that many other educational reformers advocate. Collaboration does not, however, ensure that all outcomes will be positive.

METHOD OF ENQUIRY

At the end of the first year of the new school schedules, we designed a multifaceted study to help us better understand the approach to school reform underlying this site-based design of school calendars and begin to assess the impact of choice and voice on students’ education. We began by interviewing a district superintendent and the two school principals using open-ended semi-structured approaches and a standard interview protocol. We surveyed all teachers from both schools; then we chose the senior grade level in each school (Grade 6) from which to collect additional information. We sent one survey to the parents of each Grade 6 student to assess the parents’ perceptions of the calendar changes and their satisfaction with them. Finally, we interviewed all Grade 6 teachers from both schools and again interviewed the superintendent and principals.

At Countryside, where the whole school is on a modified calendar, 16 teachers (90%) responded to our survey. At Seagull, 15 teachers on the modified calendar (more than 90%) responded, but to our surprise, no teachers on the traditional calendar participated. (This conundrum will be explained later.)

We received responses from 103 parents representing approximately one-third of the Grade 6 students in each school: 36 from Countryside and 67 from Seagull. Of the latter, 23 were from parents who had opted to retain the traditional calendar and 44 from those who had chosen the modified calendar.

We entered data from short-answer questions and Likert-type scales into one database for analysis and comparison, and compiled qualitative responses in a separate database. Qualitative items included questions such as: Briefly describe the planning process for the change which occurred at your school. What aspects did you particularly like or dislike? Is there anything else you would like us to know about the advantages and disadvantages of your present or previous school calendar? We analyzed responses according to generally accepted methods (Creswell, 1998; Tesch, 1990), identifying patterns, themes, and issues linked to choice and involvement in planning, decision making, and implementation. Although many aspects of the process that offered choice and voice were evaluated positively, comments from both parents and teachers were surprisingly bifurcated, indicating that choice may have important, unanticipated negative consequences.

RESPONSES AND PERCEPTIONS OF STAKEHOLDERS

The literature on educational change suggests that evaluations for decisions about continuing an innovation should not be made after only one year (Fullan, 1999; Kneese, 1996). This does not preclude the necessity for ongoing evaluation and feedback to determine how things are going or what modifications might help a pilot project operate more successfully. For that reason, Poseidon District welcomed the opportunity to have us gather feedback from principals, teachers, and parents.

Principals' Perceptions

When interviewed, both principals said there had been benefits to the new calendars. Each explained that the additional breaks had enabled students and teachers to renew their motivation and enthusiasm, resulting in less burnout and fatigue. One stated that the dual-track approach allowed "families to have a choice in their calendar and permitted best use to be made of school facilities." The other commented: "The modified calendar makes me a more effective leader."

At Seagull, the principal reported that the dual-track experience had resulted in a "dramatic" improvement in teacher attendance, with considerable savings to the district. In one winter month alone, the school had

saved \$4,500 on substitute teacher costs. Disciplinary incidents had fallen by 66% and vandalism had decreased markedly; he attributed both to the more frequent breaks and increased hours of operation afforded by the dual calendar. The dual track had also done much to transform the school's reputation: After the first year of the dual-track program, 30 teachers from other schools in the district had requested transfers to Seagull.

Teachers' Comments

Although we included all teachers in our survey, at Seagull only those on the modified calendar returned the questionnaires. Upon enquiry, we learned that teachers on the traditional calendar had previously been chastised by the principal when they expressed discontent over aspects of the change; they therefore refused to complete our survey. Concerned about the validity of our interpretation, we conducted confidential interviews with some of these teachers. Their opposition was not to the dual calendar but to completing surveys the principal might see. However, they told us they were troubled by the organization and impact of the inter-session program.

Overall, 30 of the 31 teachers who had tried the modified calendar preferred it; the negative exception was from Countryside. More than half of those responding reported that the new calendar had increased their overall enjoyment of teaching, with the Seagull teachers on the modified calendar reporting more improvement than the Countryside teachers. Teachers believed the YR schedule had increased their enthusiasm and motivation, improved their working environment, and decreased their job stress. Many made statements like "More frequent holidays make me much more relaxed and less stressed." One elaborated: "Having a start-up time in August to 'ourselves' was much less stressful than the usual September start up. There has been high morale amongst staff."

An overwhelming majority of teachers reported that students had also benefited significantly from the calendar change, demonstrating better academic achievement, greater motivation and interest, and better retention of learning. They believed the new schedules had a "positive effect on children with special needs as well as behaviour problems." Some also recorded better overall attendance. Others said that students were less bored and more ready for school following the breaks. Especially at Seagull, teachers emphasized that the new calendar allowed all students to participate in more educational field trips.

Overall, teachers said they were more organized, planned differently, and developed a new rhythm in their teaching and evaluation. They per-

ceived that the school's communication with parents had improved and that the number of parent volunteers had increased, perhaps due to support garnered during the consultations.

Parents' Responses

We surveyed the parents about the processes associated with the calendar change and its impact. We analyzed the responses for the two schools together and for each school separately. For Seagull, we also compared the responses of parents of children on the modified calendar with those of parents of children on the traditional calendar. When asked about their overall satisfaction with the education program at their school, 91% of the Countryside parents were either "somewhat satisfied" or "very satisfied." All Seagull parents were also either "somewhat satisfied" or "very satisfied" despite intense concerns, primarily about how the intersession program had been implemented.

More than 80% of the parents believed that they had been asked for their opinions and had been "listened to." They recognized the steps that had been taken and understood the intention. In the words of one, "I feel the process was fair and informative. Exciting too!" Many expressed support for both the planning process and the idea of calendar modification. A few, however, were skeptical about the process and made comments like, "It was orchestrated behind closed doors" and "There was no choice; the board had already decided."

Our analysis of the parent surveys found three areas of statistically significant ($p < .05$) difference. These are reported in Table 1, where the positive construct represents a higher score for the modified group and the negative constructs represent lower scores. Parents of children on a modified calendar reported greater satisfaction with their school principal and said that their children exhibited less burnout and less boredom than before.

When asked what they liked or disliked about the impact of the modified calendars, parents responded with considerable emotion, whether they were in favour of the change or opposed to it. The following comment was representative of those who were not convinced a change had been necessary: "If it's not broken don't fix it; we all grew up with the calendar and we are all fine, happy and normal people. So why change it?" Others were enthusiastic: "I love this program! I agree with the reduced summer vacation (minimizes boredom and forgetfulness of previous year's work); I agree with more frequent breaks throughout the year; gives students and teachers more cooling down periods."

TABLE 1
Means for Selected Parental Responses

<i>Response</i>	<i>Modified Mean</i>	<i>Traditional Mean</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Satisfaction with principal	3.53	3.13	2.500	.031
Burnout	1.07	1.38	-2.343	.032
Boredom	1.08	1.35	-2.161	.044

Seagull's intersession program drew the most attention. Here again, the responses were mixed. Many parents thought the program was excellent and appreciated the opportunity for enrichment activities, though a few were anxious about the cost. Other parents (especially those with children on the traditional calendar) expressed concern about the program's impact on the learning environment. Several outlined the problem as follows. Seagull had implemented its calendar change in a spirit of openness, emphasizing parental choice and trying to ensure that all students benefited from the dual-track program. Unfortunately, this permitted students from the traditional-calendar classes to participate in programs offered during the modified calendar intersessions "instead of being taught." Some parents believed that children on the traditional calendar were getting less schooling because the modified-calendar intersession activities interfered with the traditional program by allowing the participation of both groups of students. Some felt that even though they refused to allow their own children to participate, classes were not conducted as usual because of the large number of classmates involved in intersession activities. They perceived that students on the traditional calendar therefore did not receive the same number of classroom hours as students on the modified calendar and would "never catch up,"³ provoking concerns about both equity and instructional time.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although our central concern has been how processes that ensure choice and voice affected the success of the calendar change, a number of issues require further comment. The benefits associated with the calendar modifications in Poseidon District have been well documented elsewhere (Shields, 1998; Shields & Oberg, 2000) and are consistent with the YRS literature in general. Increased teacher motivation, new approaches to instructional planning, and a lower rate of teacher absenteeism are frequently

noted (Peltier, 1991; Zykowski, Mitchell, Hough, & Gavin, 1991). Less boredom, more sustained academic interest, greater motivation among students, and fewer incidents of vandalism have also been reported elsewhere (Hazelton, Blakely, & Denton, 1992; Merino, 1983).

In Poseidon District, the implementation of YRS has been successful largely because planning and implementation emphasized flexibility, choice, and voice. However, here as elsewhere, no matter how many invitations are extended, how many open meetings are held, or how widely information is disseminated, some people (generally those opposed) say they had no opportunity to be heard. Here, initial discussion about modified school calendars had included assurances that change would not be forced on anyone. These assurances helped to garner the support of staff members and union representatives, who agreed to work to the spirit rather than the letter of their contracts. Although one original provision was that YRS should not increase costs, the district interpreted this flexibly. For example, it allowed savings in costs for substitute teachers to offset the costs of summer bussing at Countryside.

We continue to be bewildered that relocating two or three weeks of vacation requires elaborate planning and produces intense feelings and significant changes in perception and satisfaction. We caution schools and districts wishing to implement even modest changes from what has become entrenched as "traditional" to learn from the experience of Poseidon District. Successful change requires extensive communication, consultation, and planning. Offering flexible arrangements and choice may also enhance its acceptability. Offering choices to teachers and parents was associated with a generally high level of satisfaction and support for the modified calendars. Participants were pleased that each school council had been permitted to design its own calendar rather than having to adopt a district-imposed modification. The district was also careful to build adequate support for the change by setting a very high threshold (80%) for approval and by providing safeguards for those opposed to the calendar change. Students and teachers from Countryside who did not support the new calendar were permitted to transfer, and parents at Seagull were offered a choice of calendars and were promised that at the end of the school year they could move their children back from the modified calendar to the traditional one if they wished. We have found elsewhere that such safeguards are a consistent element of successful programs.

Our research in districts with a longer history of YRS suggests there will likely be additional (and perhaps unanticipated) consequences of the very liberal policies regarding flexibility and choice in Poseidon District. At this point, for example, there are no policy guidelines (particularly for dual-track schools) to help determine which teachers should teach on a modified

calendar and which should remain on a traditional schedule if volunteers and enrollments do not match. Similarly, there are no mechanisms for determining which children should move to a modified calendar and which should remain on a traditional calendar if some requests have to be denied to maintain appropriate class sizes and balance.

One downside of flexibility, choice, and voice was exemplified by the intersession program at Seagull. The staff and council there needed to deal with the concerns raised when students on a traditional schedule were released to participate in modified-calendar intersession activities. Effective teaching is compromised without continuity of instruction. The original plan gave students on the traditional calendar the opportunity to sabotage their own learning, and frustrated parents and teachers. Although the practice was intended to maximize participation and extend learning opportunities, it became counter-productive in that it threatened the learning of students on the traditional calendar and soon endangered the whole program. Bending over backwards to be fair was manifestly unfair to the very students it sought to enfranchise; yet, once it was implemented, it became very difficult to reverse a policy that some students and parents had come to believe was an inherent right.

CONCLUSION

Most literature on implementing school change advocates paying considerable attention to the choice and voice of stakeholder groups (Epstein, 1992; Joyce, 1978; Murphy, 1992). In Poseidon District, the planning and decision-making processes empowered most participants, and flexibility, choice, and voice were effective components of successful school change.

Yet there are cautions. Ironically, the policy designed to maximize choice actually disadvantaged those it sought to empower. Here, the well-intentioned decision to permit participation in intersession activities by those who had already opted for the status quo of the traditional schedule resulted in an inequitable outcome. Sometimes, in an effort to maintain choice, the lack of boundaries creates disruption, uncertainty, and discontent. Although increasing the element of stakeholder choice and voice in decisions about school change is desirable, there is a need to delineate boundaries for choice. Educational policy makers and reformers need to pay more attention to this issue.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We gratefully acknowledge the funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada without which this research could not have been conducted.

NOTES

1. This article was submitted and accepted before Professor Shields became Book Review Editor of this journal. Some references have since been updated.
2. All names are pseudonyms.
3. Newly implemented provincial standardized testing will permit us to check this perception in our follow-up study.

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